Responding to Child Welfare Concerns

Your Role in Knowing When and What to Report

BRITISH COLUMBIA

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INTRODUCTION

Most children grow up in families where they are safe and secure. Others may be abused or neglected – and those children need our help.

Whether they are our own kids, a neighbour's or a stranger's, we all have a role to play in keeping children safe. This booklet tells you how you can help by:

- knowing the signs of abuse and neglect, and
- knowing what to do when a child may be at risk.

This booklet also tells you what happens after someone makes a report about child abuse or neglect, including the steps a child welfare worker takes to support families and help keep children safe. Finally, it tells you where to get help – for yourself or someone in your family or community.

Child abuse and neglect are serious problems. We all have to work together to prevent them, and take action if we believe a child is being harmed.

This booklet is for everyone in British Columbia who cares about children. Thank you for reading it and learning what you can do. It could make a world of difference to a child.

If you think a child is being abused or neglected, you have the legal duty to report your concern to your local child welfare worker. There is contact information available on page 12.

If it is after hours or you are not sure who to call, phone the Helpline for Children at 310-1234 at any time of the day or night. The Helpline call is free. You do not need an area code and you do not have to give your name.

If the child is in immediate danger, call 9-1-1 or your local police.

WHAT IS THE LAW?

In British Columbia, the law that protects children from abuse and neglect in their homes is the *Child, Family and Community Service Act*. It states that anyone who has concerns about a child's safety and well-being must promptly report that concern to a child welfare worker. In B.C., a child is anyone under the age of 19.

The same law gives child welfare workers the authority to help when children are at risk. These workers may be employed by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) or by a Delegated Aboriginal Child and Family Services Agency.

Child welfare workers provide a range of services to families, including child protection, to help keep children safe. They do this in partnership with police and people in the justice, education and health care systems as well as with agencies that provide services to children and families.

Children who suffer abuse and neglect are also often victims of an offence under the *Criminal Code of Canada*. Police respond first when a child is in immediate danger, or when someone has, or is likely to have, committed a crime.

WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT?

Child abuse can take different forms. It may be physical, sexual, emotional – or the result of neglect.

Physical abuse is any physical action by a person that harms, or could harm, a child. It includes hitting, kicking, slapping, shaking, burning, pinching, biting, choking, throwing, shoving and whipping. It also includes using unreasonable force to punish children or prevent them from harming themselves or others.

The child's injuries may range from minor bruises, burns, welts or bite marks to broken bones or – in extreme cases – death.

Emotional abuse is the most difficult kind of abuse to define and recognize. It is best described as a pattern of harmful behaviour. It includes any attitude or action by an adult that is likely to have serious, negative emotional effects on a child. Emotional abuse can include a pattern of:

- scapegoating
- blaming
- rejection
- verbal attacks on the child
- threats
- insults, or
- humiliation.

Emotional harm can result from emotional abuse. It can also happen to children who witness violence in their homes. Children who are emotionally harmed will often have serious:

- anxiety
- depression
- withdrawal (keeping to themselves all the time), or
- self-destructive or aggressive behaviour.

Sexual abuse happens when a person uses a child for sexual purposes. It can include:

- sexually touching a child, or inviting a child to touch
- intercourse (vaginal, oral or anal)
- threatening sexual acts, obscene gestures or communications, or stalking
- sexual references (words or gestures) to the child's body or behaviour
- asking the child to expose their body for sexual purposes
- exposing the child to sexual activity or material, or
- sexual aspects of organized or ritual abuse.

Sexual exploitation happens when a child becomes involved in sexual activity, usually through manipulation or coercion, in exchange for things like money, drugs, food or shelter. Sexual activities include:

- sexual acts
- sex for the purpose of entertainment
- escort or massage parlor services, and
- appearing in pornographic images.

Children in the sex trade are not prostitutes or criminals. They are victims of sexual exploitation.

Neglect happens when a parent or guardian ignores or overlooks a child's basic needs – to the point where the child is, or could be, harmed. Neglect includes failing to provide a child with food, shelter, basic health care, supervision, nurturing or protection from risks.

WARNING SIGNS OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Children who are abused or neglected almost always show signs of what they have been going through. Some of the most common signs are listed below. These are warning signs. They *do not* always mean that abuse or neglect is happening. But if you do see these signs, you should be concerned.

Physical warning signs may include:

- Any injury or bruising to a baby who is not crawling or walking yet - especially head or facial injuries.
- Injuries where there is no explanation, the explanation does not seem to fit with the injuries, or the story keeps changing.
- Injuries with a pattern or in the shape of an object like a hand, stick, buckle, stove element, etc.
- Bruising in unusual places, such as the ears, neck, upper arms, back, thighs or buttocks.

- The child is not seeing a doctor or dentist when needed
- Clothing that does not protect the child from the weather
- The child looks unwell or hungry, or complains of hunger, or is unusually thin or malnourished
- Poor personal hygiene
- Unexplained genital or anal injuries
- Sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy, especially in a young child

Other warning signs may include:

- Running away from home or being scared to go home
- In a young child, not responding to affection or positive attention
- Poor self-esteem (for example, when children call themselves bad or say they deserve to be punished)
- Unexplained setbacks, like toileting problems in a child who has been toilet trained
- Extreme aggression or withdrawal
- Suicidal thoughts or self-destructive behaviour (such as self-mutilation, a suicide attempt or extreme risk-taking)
- Foraging for, hoarding or stealing food
- Problems at school like poor attendance or trouble paying attention
- Delinquent behaviour like drinking, drug use, stealing, fire setting, etc.
- Showing sexual knowledge not common for their age in their language, behaviour, drawings or play, or forcing another child into sexual play
- Withdrawing from family, friends and activities the child used to enjoy
- Having unexplained gifts, new clothes or sums of money
- Being secretive about "new" friends, activities, phone calls or Internet use

Remember: *These are warning signs. They do not necessarily mean a child is being abused or neglected. But if you see one or more of these signs you should be concerned.*

If you are not sure, call a child welfare worker who will discuss your concerns with you.

IF A CHILD TELLS YOU THEY HAVE BEEN ABUSED OR NEGLECTED

Sometimes, children who are being abused or neglected will tell someone they trust. If this happens to you:

Stay calm and listen. Let the child tell their story. You may feel angry or shocked or scared, but you need to be calm for the child's sake. That way, they know it is okay to talk about what happened.

Go slowly. Let the child tell you what happened in their own way and at their own pace. Gentle questions such as: "Can you tell me more about what happened?" can help.

Be supportive. Let the child know that:

- they are not in trouble and have not done anything wrong
- they did the right thing by telling you
- you are sorry this has happened to them
- you will do everything you can to help; and
- you know other people who can help them, too.

Get only the basic facts. You do not need a lot of details. You just need to know what happened in general. Remember that the child may have to tell their story to a child welfare worker, and maybe the police, too. And it is hard to have to talk about abuse or neglect again and again.

Tell the child what will happen next. Let them know you will be talking to a child welfare worker, and possibly the police, who may need to come and talk to them.

If the child asks questions, answer what you can. If you do not know the answer, it is okay to say, "I do not know" or "We can ask the child welfare worker about that." Do not promise to keep it a secret.

IF YOU BELIEVE A CHILD MAY BE AT RISK OF CHILD ABUSE OR NEGLECT

- If a child tells you they have been abused or neglected – or if you have a reason to believe a child is being harmed – call your local child welfare worker. There is contact information available on page 12. If it is after hours or you are not sure who to call, phone the ***Helpline for Children at 310-1234***.
- You do not need proof. Just report what you know.
- If you are not sure, or if you have questions, or if you think someone else has already made a report, you should still call the Helpline.
- The call is free. You do not need an area code. And you can call any time of day or night.
- ***If the child is in immediate danger, call 9-1-1 or your local police.***

> ***YOUR DUTY TO REPORT***
> *Under B.C. law you have a duty to report your concerns if you have reason to believe a child has been, or is likely to be, abused or neglected. "Reason to believe" means that, based on what you have seen, or information you have, you believe a child could be at risk.*

What to expect when you make a report

The person you speak to will be a child welfare worker, specially trained in responding to reports of child abuse and neglect. The child welfare worker will ask you for basic information, such as:

- The child's name, age and location
- Any immediate concerns for the child's safety
- Why you think the child is at risk
- What the child has said
- Any info about the child's parents and/or the alleged offender(s)
- Whether any other children may be affected
- Whether the child has any disabilities or speaks a language other than English
- The names of other people or agencies involved with the child and/or family.

Do not wait until you have all this information. Just tell the child welfare worker what you know. They will also ask for your name and phone number, and how you know the child. If you do not want to give your name or phone number, that is okay. If you do, every effort will be made to keep your name confidential.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YOU MAKE A REPORT

A child welfare worker will look into your report and decide on the best way to keep the child safe. The worker may be with the Ministry of Children and Family Development, or with a Delegated Aboriginal Child and Family Services Agency that specializes in helping Aboriginal children and families.

If the child is at immediate risk of harm, the child welfare worker – and others, such as police, family and community members – will act right away to keep the child safe.

If the child is NOT at immediate risk but needs help, the child welfare worker may offer supports for the family, or connect them with others who can help in their community.

Keeping children safe

Child welfare workers work directly with families and the people who support them (like friends, relatives and community members).

When responding to reports of suspected child abuse and neglect, child welfare workers choose the best way to help keep the child safe. For example:

» They may use a family development response. That means they work out a plan with the family that will strengthen the family's ability to help keep the child safe. That plan could involve using services available in the community so that the child can live at home safely.

» If the child is 16 or older and disconnected from family, they may use a youth service response. That involves providing support and services to the youth and the family until they can safely be together again, or the youth can live independently through a youth services agreement.

» In other cases, the child welfare worker may start an investigation. This involves seeing and talking to the child and people who know the child, such as parents, extended family, a teacher, doctor or child-care provider. If the child is Aboriginal, their band or community may also be involved.

Children can only be removed from their homes if nothing less disruptive will protect them. If this happens, a court process starts. A Family Court Judge hears evidence from all sides and then decides where the child will live until the child can safely return home. Usually the child will stay with family members, friends or a foster family during this time.

Planning and decision making processes such as family group conferences, mediation or traditional ways of bringing families and communities together can be used to make plans to keep children safe without having to go to court.

HOW CAN WE HELP PREVENT CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT?

As parents, family and community members, we are all responsible for making sure children are safe and well-cared for. Here are some simple things that everyone can do.

Parents:

» Know your limits. Parenting is hard work. Everyone gets stressed now and then – and everyone needs a break sometimes. Arrange for someone you trust to care for your child and go for a walk.

» If you need help, ask for it. If family and friends are not available, ask someone you trust like your family doctor. Or call the your local child welfare worker. There is contact information available on page 12. If it is after hours or you are not sure who to call, phone the ***Helpline for Children at 310-1234***

» Learn about positive parenting and healthy ways to discipline your children. There are many Internet sites with lots of information for parents such as ***www.inyourgrasp.bc.ca*** and the Ministry of Children and Family Development site - ***www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/child_protection/index.htm***

Family and friends:

» Offer to baby-sit, or be there to support a parent who needs help.
» Take a stressed parent out for coffee or a walk to talk about what is going on.
» Learn about supports in your community and share the information with a parent who is struggling. Let them know it is okay to ask for help, and that there are others who can lend a hand.

Everyone:

» Know the warning signs of child abuse and neglect. If you think a child may be harmed, call the your local child welfare worker. There is contact information available on page 12. If it is after hours or you are not sure who to call, phone the ***Helpline for Children at 310-1234***

Never:

» shake a baby or young child – it can cause brain damage, blindness or death.
» discipline a child when your anger is out of control.
» leave a young child alone, even for a short time.

IF YOU NEED HELP

Call your local child welfare worker or the Helpline for Children at 310-1234. The Helpline call is free. You do not need an area code. And you can call any time of day or night.

On the other end of the phone

When you call the Helpline, you will reach a child welfare worker who is ready to listen, help and take action. These workers care about what is going on, and it is their job to help children and families who are having problems.

Anyone can call the Helpline at 310-1234

Children - Children who are being abused or neglected, or just need to talk to someone, can call for help.

Parents - Parents who are hurting their children or worried they might hurt their children can call for help and learn about supports in their community.

Relatives, friends and community members - Anyone who thinks a child is, or may be, abused or neglected has a legal duty to report their concern to a child welfare worker.

How to Contact a Child Welfare Worker

Monday to Friday - During working hours (8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.), call:

- the local Ministry of Children and Family Development office – listed in the blue pages of the phone book or online at ***www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/regions/regional_offices.htm***
- the local Delegated Aboriginal Child and Family Services Agency – listed in the white pages of the phone book or online at ***www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/about_us/aboriginal/delegated/pdf/agency_list.pdf***
- Enquiry BC - Metro Vancouver at 604-660-2421; Greater Victoria at 250-387-6121; Elsewhere in BC at 1-800-663-7867. Ask for your local MCFD office or Delegated Aboriginal Child and Family Services Agency nearest you.

After hours - After hours (Monday to Friday 4:30 p.m. to 8:30 a.m., and all day Saturday, Sunday and statutory holidays) for both MCFD and Delegated Aboriginal Child and Family Services Agencies, call:

- in Vancouver, North Shore, Richmond – 604 660-4927
- in the Lower Mainland, Burnaby, Delta, Maple Ridge, Langley – 604 660-8180
- in any community in B.C. – 1 800-663-9122

Telephone Device for the Deaf (TDD)

Call toll-free 1 866-660-0505, province-wide and 24 hours a day.

WHERE TO GET HELP

Parent Support Services of BC

Parent Support Services of BC is a non-profit, volunteer-based society whose mandate is preventing child abuse and promoting healthy parent-child relationships by supporting parents, families and communities. ***www.parentsupportbc.ca***
Phone: 1 800 665-6880

BC Council for Families

The BC Council for Families is a non-profit, non-governmental organization that supports families by providing resources, education and training to strengthen family relationships. ***www.bccf.bc.ca***
Vancouver: 604 660-0675 Toll Free: 1 800 663-5638

In Your Grasp

In Your Grasp is an online resource for B.C. families jointly developed by the BC Federation of Foster Parent Associations, the Adoptive Families Association of BC and the Federation of Aboriginal Foster Parents. This resource provides direct and immediate access to information regarding support services and is available to ALL families in British Columbia. ***www.inyourgrasp.bc.ca***

VictimLINK

VictimLINK provides help for anyone who has been a victim of crime. You can call from anywhere in the province at any time of the day or night. There are people who can talk to you in the language you speak best. ***www.pssg.gov.bc.ca/victim_services***
Phone: 1 800 563-0808

Complaint Resolution Process for the Ministry of Children and Family Development

If you don't agree with a decision or action of the ministry, you can make a complaint to the Ministry of Children and Family Development. For more information about the complaint resolution process, click on ***www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/complaints/index.htm*** or call your nearest Ministry of Children and Family Development office and ask for the person responsible for responding to complaints.

Complaint Resolution Processes for the Delegated Aboriginal Child and Family Services Agencies

Each delegated agency has its own complaint resolution process. Contact the agency for more information. Contact information for delegated Aboriginal child welfare agencies can be found in the white pages, or online at ***www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/about_us/aboriginal/delegated/pdf/agency_list.pdf***

Representative for Children and Youth

Responsibilities of the Representative include advocating and supporting children and youth, protecting their rights, and making the child protection system more responsive, particularly for those who are most vulnerable. ***www.rcybc.ca***
Phone: 1-800-476-3933 (Confidential, for all of B.C.)

Ombudsman

The Ombudsman receives questions and complaints about the services provided by public agencies. The Ombudsman can conduct investigations to determine if a public agency is being fair to the people it serves. ***www.ombud.gov.bc.ca***
Phone: 1 800 567-3247 (all of B.C.)

Public Guardian and Trustee of British Columbia

The Public Guardian and Trustee protects the legal and financial interests of minors and acts in the roles of Trustee, Guardian of Estate and Litigation Guardian.
www.trustee.bc.ca/services/youth/index.html
Phone: 1 604 660-4444

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For more information see our website at: www.mcf.gov.bc.ca

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